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Aging issues and answers #9; The "Five Wishes"

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Lieutenant Governor

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Question: I read an article recently that encouraged people to plan for medical emergencies by completing papers to give their family and doctors directions about what they would want if they were unable to communicate. The article mentioned something called the "Five Wishes." What is that?

Answer: "Five Wishes" is a specific type of advance directive that was created by a national non-profit organization called Aging With Dignity. Advance directives are legally binding instructions for how you want to be cared for if you are ever in a situation where you are unable to communicate your wishes. According to the literature about the Five Wishes Document on the group's web site (www.agingwithdignity.org), "Five Wishes is an easy-to-use legal document that lets adults of all ages plan how they want to be cared for in case they become seriously ill. It gives people control over their medical care, as well as the peace-of-mind that comes from expressing their own wishes and knowing those of their loved ones."

That's not a bad description, and the Five Wishes document became a legal format – though not the only legal format – for executing a living will and a health care power of attorney in South Carolina in 2005. One thing that makes the Five Wishes format an attractive option for many people planning these types of decisions is that the paperwork for these legal instruments used in the Five Wishes is recognized in 39 states besides South Carolina. In other words, if you fill out the forms in one of those states and then move here – or vice versa – you won't have to redo them. The Five Wishes forms are available for purchase from the Aging with Dignity organization, but many hospitals, nursing homes and other non-profits will provide them for free.

Other standardized forms for living wills and healthcare powers of attorney that have been approved as legal documents in South Carolina state law are available for free through our Elder Rights program – a part of the Lt. Governor's Office on Aging. State law mandates the Lt. Governor's Office on Aging provide information to South Carolina citizens about advance directives, living wills and health care powers of

attorney.

State (and federal) laws also give all competent adults, 18 years or older, the right to make their own health care decisions, including the right to decide what medical care or treatment to accept, reject or discontinue. If you do not want to receive certain types of treatment or if you wish to name someone to make health care decisions for you, you have the right to make these desires known to your doctor, hospital or other health care providers and to have these rights respected. You also have the right to be told about the nature of your illness in terms that you can understand; as well as the right to be informed about the general nature of any proposed treatments, the risks of failing to undergo these treatments, and any alternative treatments or procedures that may be available to you.

For more information about these issues, or to get help with obtaining forms for advance directive or living wills and filling them out, contact the Lt. Governor's Office on Aging in Columbia at 1-800-868-9095 or the regional Long Term Care Ombudsman Office that serves your county.